



An artist's rendering of the reconstructed interchange of Interstates 95 and 91.

Elm City's perpetual tradition of change

IN the nearly four centuries since New Haven's settlement in 1638, the city has gone from a utopian, nine-square vision to sprawl far beyond those confines.

More than 10,000 years ago, a glacier pushed the Connecticut River's course eastward, leaving the Quinnipiac River to take a dramatically reduced flow to a huge, deep harbor created by the Connecticut River's massive outflow.

Like almost all 17th century settlements, New Haven had a safe harbor. Today, even with its rejuvenated harbor, New Haven, for most people, is at the intersection of two huge highways finished less than 50 years ago: Interstates 95 and 91.

The vast majority of us have no idea what glaciers did or what the nine squares of New Haven were. Rather, we measure change by the construction around us. Despite a national economy that has lagged for several years, our little New England city seems to have a far greater share of construction than any other Connecticut city.

There is a magic to watching a building being built, starting with "shock and awe" when the site is prepared via demolition and excavation. Then, an empty site's mystery slowly gives way to the thrill of discovery as something completely new happens.

It was a giddy delight when Kent Bloomer's Louis Sullivan-inspired ornament appeared at the street level facade of 360 State. There will be a similar rush of excitement when the huge corner curve of Gateway Community College's building form is revealed. And one can only imagine the amazement when New Haven's largest stringed instrument, the I-95 bridge over the harbor, is traveled upon.

The new bridge is just the jewel in the crown of one of the largest infrastructure projects being built in the country: the I-95 New Haven Harbor Crossing Corridor Improvement Program. The huge, slithering array of steel ribbons and concrete piers, a dozen or more new bridges, sound deadening walls, dug and built up roadbeds, mounded masses of earth and never-ending traffic pattern changes is exhilarating, exhausting and exasperating.

Now that another round of federal aid is in hand to recreate the easterly end of the Route 34 con-

nect, major roadway infrastructure construction will continue unabated for at least the next decade.

With the recent completion of the gigantic Smilow Cancer Center at Yale-New Haven Hospital, the near completion of 360 State (the largest single residential building in Connecticut), the construction of Gateway Community College and the soon coming out of the ground Yale School of Management on Whitney Avenue, our downtown has had ongoing episodic explosions of large-scale construction for more than a decade.

New Haven is set apart from many cities because these large projects are in full view of hundreds of thousands of commuters, visitors and residents.

It could easily be said that New Haven has a perpetual tradition of change. Without the hub of the nine squares with the central New Haven Green for all these changes, there would be no meter to the evolving song of our city's evolution. Unlike the constant inflations of each new suburban big-box store, there is a sense of civic progress that is palpable

in New Haven's high-profile and muscular build-outs.

Without understanding where we've been, it's hard to get a sense that we are going anywhere. If everything around us changes all the time, there is no ability to perceive progress, only difference.

The dynamism, excitement and inherent hope that new construction embodies and inspires can be painful in the short term, and sometimes the results do not live up to expectations. The memories of Elm Haven, Coliseum and Chapel Square Mall make me wince. However, the push to make things better, the essence of the human spirit, is a powerfully positive impetus for a little city.

Building upon the foundation of four centuries of concentric expansion, New Haven seems to have the capacity to encourage and absorb a vast amount of recreation without sacrificing a sense of history that many similar cities lack. That rare blending is something we should be extremely thankful for.



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